



## **Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks**

### **ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT DECISION NOTICE**

#### **Removal of Unauthorized Fish in Carter Ponds**

Region 4  
4600 Giant Springs Road  
Great Falls MT 59405-0901  
December 9, 2014

#### **Proposed Action**

Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks (FWP) proposed removing unauthorized populations of bluegill and yellow perch from Upper and Lower Carter Ponds. The purpose of the proposed management action is to eliminate the unauthorized species to return the ponds to trout fisheries as designed in the 2007 dams reconstruction project. Trout in the Carter Ponds exhibit growth rates and maximum sizes not seen in other Lewistown area ponds/reservoirs due to a productive forage base and a lack of competition from sucker species. The bluegill populations in both ponds have expanded quickly and are having negative impacts on the trout fisheries via competition. The yellow perch populations have not been detected in high numbers yet, but they are expected to grow rapidly and have additional negative impacts on the trout fisheries. Additionally, both ponds and their outlet structures were rebuilt in 2007 to eliminate the chronic trout winterkills, restore the high quality trout fisheries, and improve habitat conditions for fish and wildlife. Those efforts cost approximately \$430,000 and the fisheries goal of that project has been compromised by the unauthorized introduction of bluegill and yellow perch.

#### **Montana Environmental Policy Act**

FWP is required by the Montana Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) to assess significant potential impacts of a proposed action to the human and physical environment. In preparation for the draft EA, FWP hosted a public meeting to determine what management direction the public preferred for the Carter Ponds. This meeting was held on September 4, 2014. In compliance with MEPA, a draft Environmental Assessment was prepared by FWP for the proposed project and released on October 17, 2014 for public comment. The draft EA was titled: Removal of Unauthorized Fish in Carter Ponds. The draft EA was circulated to local sporting groups and was also posted on the FWP webpage: <http://fwp.mt.gov/news/publicNotices>. The EA evaluated the potential impacts of the following alternatives:

#### Alternative A: No Action

If the No Action alternative were adopted, the status quo would continue in the Carter Ponds. The quality of the fishery would continue to decline, as bluegill and yellow perch populations would continue to expand to the point of stunting and continue to limit rainbow trout growth by competing for the same food resources. The No Action alternative would not fulfill the objectives of improving the fisheries in the Carter Ponds nor would it restore a quality trout fishery as intended by the 2007 dams reconstruction project.

#### Alternative B: Stock Predator

Stocking a predator fish species in the reservoirs would likely improve the quality of the angling opportunities in the Carter Ponds by providing some control of the bluegill and yellow perch populations. This alternative would likely improve the existing fisheries; however it would not restore a quality trout fishery to the Carter Pond complex as was the objective in the 2007 dams reconstruction project. This alternative also rewards the illegal introduction by allowing the unauthorized species to persist and altering the fisheries management for the unauthorized species. One objective of the 2007 dams reconstruction project was to create a quality trout fishery. Stocking a predator fish to manage the illegal bluegill and perch populations would not fulfill the objectives of this proposal or the 2007 dams reconstruction project.

#### Alternative C: Upper Pond Drawdown

The Upper Pond drawdown alternative would result in the removal of the unauthorized species from the upper pond only. This would be done by drawdown of the pond to encourage winterkill in order eliminate the existing fisheries from the reservoir. This alternative would result in diversity of species to angle at this site but it would only partially fulfill the objectives of the 2007 dams reconstruction project. However, this alternative would also reward the illegal introduction by managing bluegill and perch in the lower pond. Furthermore, this alternative does create a high risk of someone moving bluegill and perch from the lower pond to the upper pond simply due to having a source of bluegill and perch so close to the upper pond. This alternative would not meet the objectives of this proposal or the objectives of the 2007 dams reconstruction project.

#### Alternative D: Remove Unauthorized fish species (Preferred Alternative)

The Remove Unauthorized fish species alternative would result in the desired objectives to restore the quality trout fisheries as identified in this proposal and the 2007 dams reconstruction project. The ponds would be managed at trout fisheries. The preferred alternative would not reward the illegal introductions. Prior to the unauthorized introductions negatively impacting the trout fisheries, the Carter Ponds provided a unique angling opportunity for large trout in a publically accessible reservoir. This would be the desired outcome of the preferred alternative.

#### Summary of Public Comment and FWP Response

The public meeting was attended by 15 people. The meeting consisted of a discussion of the fisheries management history at Carter Ponds, the rebuilding and improvement project on the ponds, and the current fisheries and impacts the unauthorized species are having on the trout fishery. Most commenters expressed a desire to remove the unauthorized species and return the trout fisheries to the ponds. One individual expressed an appreciation for the status quo and the ability to catch bluegill close to town.

A total of 15 comments were received during the public comment period which ended on November 16, 2014. Eleven comments were supportive of the Preferred Alternative, three comments were made in support of the No Action Alternative, and one comment was made without expressing a position. Comment summaries and the department's responses are as follows:

#### Comment Summary 1

Are the unauthorized species really having an impact on the trout fisheries?

*Response:* FWP sampling data indicates that unauthorized species are having negative impacts on the trout fisheries. Current impacts are primarily from the bluegill, as the yellow perch population has not become established to date. The data show a drastic decline in catch-per-unit-effort (i.e. density) and body condition following the establishment of the bluegill populations. This is clearly demonstrated in Upper Carter Pond, as seen in Figures 1 & 2.

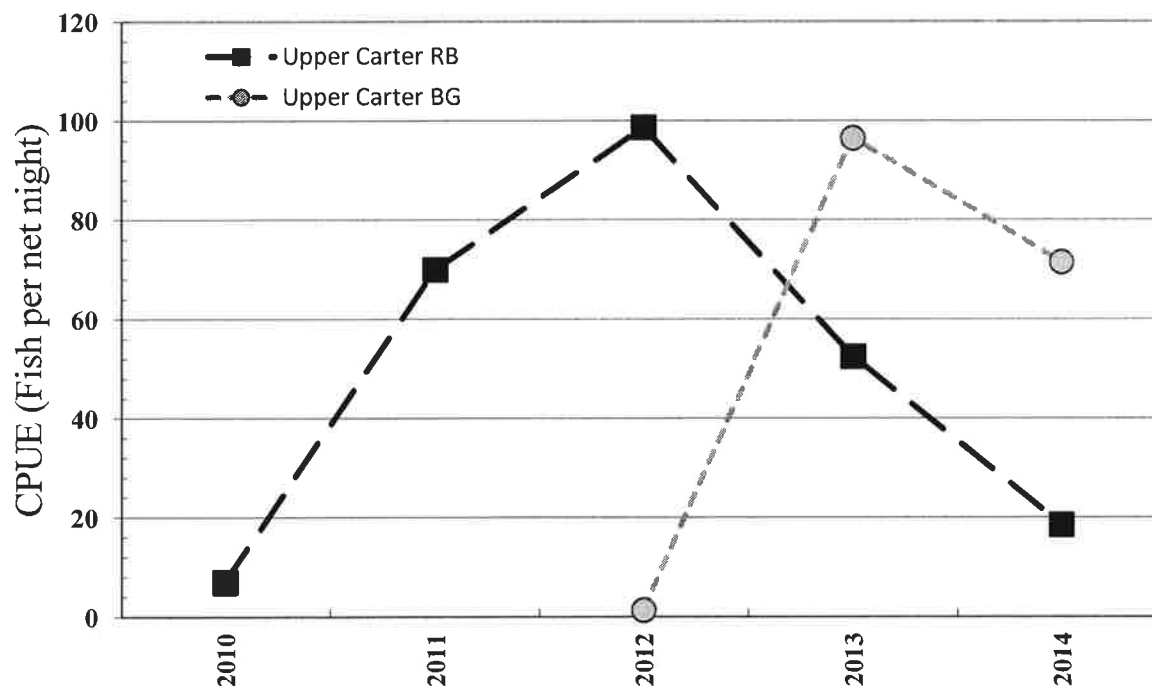


Figure 1. Catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) of rainbow trout and bluegill in Upper Carter Pond following 2009 dam improvements.

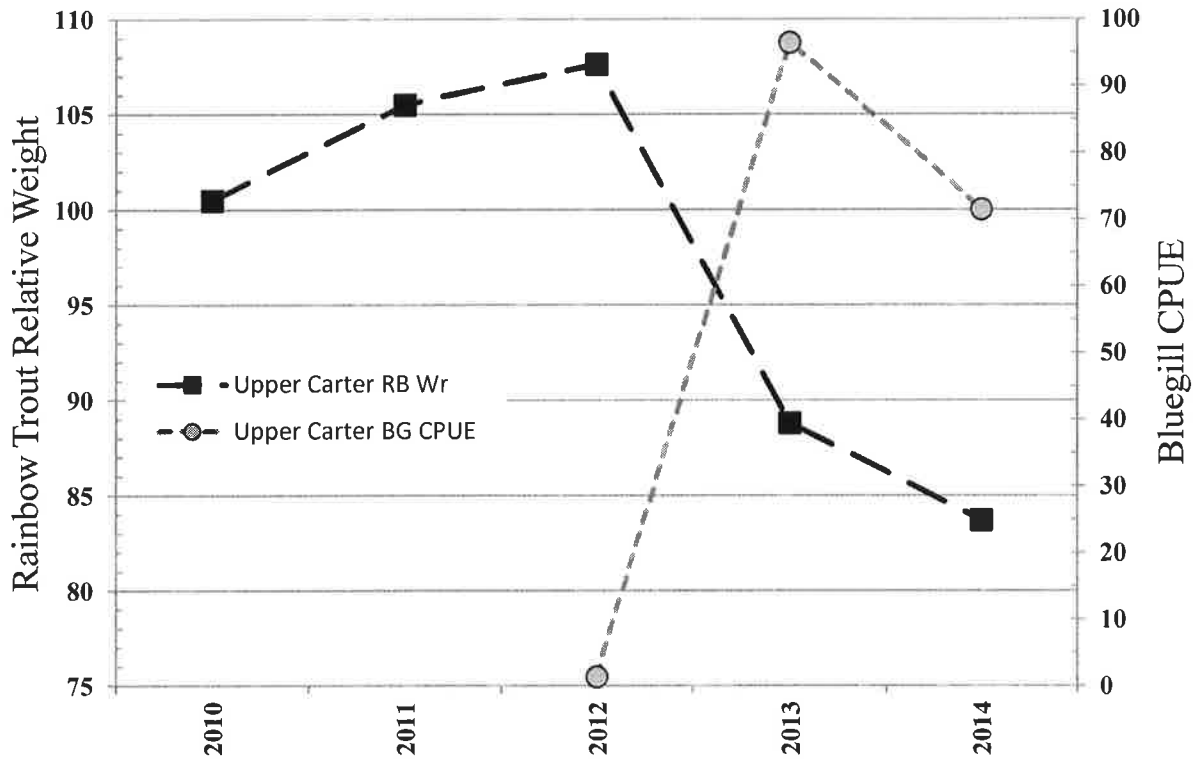


Figure 2. Rainbow trout condition, as measured by relative weight, and bluegill catch-per-unit-effort (CPUE) in Upper Carter Pond from 2010 to 2014. Note decline in rainbow trout condition corresponding with increase in bluegill abundance.

The fisheries data indicate that the bluegill are effectively reproducing and competing with the trout fisheries. The increased competition as the bluegill population grows has led to fewer trout being available for anglers to catch and the trout are in poorer condition. The species could coexist in the ponds together, however due to the high levels of competition and uncontrolled growth of the bluegill population, both fisheries would be in poor condition, lack quality-sized fish, and the fisheries potential that exists in the Carter Ponds would not be met.

### Comment Summary 2

There are plenty of trout fisheries in the Lewistown area, why do the Carter Ponds need to be trout-only fisheries at the expense of losing a diverse angling opportunity close to town? There is a lack of angling diversity in the Lewistown area.

*Response:* FWP is aware that some anglers are not satisfied with the diversity of angling opportunities available in the Lewistown area. This is an issue that we are attempting to address by altering the stocking and species available at local waters such as Ackley Lake and Big Casino Creek Reservoir. This review of the fisheries at Carter Ponds has highlighted the fact that some anglers would appreciate the opportunity for bluegill at a local reservoir. FWP has the authority and management framework to

expand angling diversity in the local waters after thorough scientific review. Unfortunately, the illegal introductions of bluegill and yellow perch in Carter Ponds were not scientifically based, did not involve any public input, and have had negative impacts to existing fisheries. The Carter Ponds have a long history of providing unique trout fisheries for large fish due to abundant forage and a lack of sucker species. These factors led to growth rates and sizes of fish not seen in other Lewistown area reservoirs. It is this factor that drove recent management direction and the present proposed management action. Similar bluegill opportunities can be recreated in other local waters. Following public feedback, FWP will be evaluating developing bluegill fisheries in other Lewistown area waters. Potential waters under consideration include the Frog Ponds or Big Casino Creek Reservoir.

### Comment Summary 3

FWP should place special regulations on the Upper and Lower Carter Ponds to create a trophy fishery. The public deserves the opportunity to catch trophy fish that are typically limited to private ponds in the Lewistown area.

*Response:* FWP plans to manage Upper Carter Pond as a put-grow-and-take fishery while Lower Carter Pond will be managed as a trophy fishery. This would be done by altering the stocking rates between the two fisheries. Additional efforts to create a trophy fishery in the lower pond are still being evaluated, but may include special regulations and/or stocking different rainbow trout strains or trout species.

### Comment Summary 4

What is going to be done in order to prevent future illegal introductions in the Carter Ponds? How does FWP plan to avoid being in the same position 5 years from now?

*Response:* Illegal introductions are a chronic fisheries management issue that is extremely difficult, if not impossible to prevent. The best way to mitigate against illegal introductions is to educate the public and encourage self-governance. At the Carter Ponds, FWP plans to place signage detailing the history of the ponds and the impacts of the illegal introductions. These signs would include details of the penalties and the TIP-MONT contact information. As detailed in Comment Summary 5, FWP also plans to use the Carter Ponds example to educate the public on the impacts of illegal introductions. FWP is attempting to increase communication with the public to determine the root of the issue via newspaper editorials and public meetings. Also, future fisheries management actions are being developed so as to provide additional angling diversity opportunities where various species, such as bluegill, may be more appropriate and have less impact to existing fisheries. The Fish and Wildlife Commission recently adopted the Illegal Placement of Fish Rule which provides criteria for FWP to follow for future illegal introductions. Any future illegal introduction in the Carter

Ponds would be dealt with according to the new rule, which may, in the most extreme case, lead to FWP abandoning management of the fishery.

#### Comment Summary 5


FWP should involve local students and/or the public with future data collection and monitoring information so as to educate the public on the impacts of illegal introductions.

*Response:* FWP agrees that the Carter Ponds example is an opportunity to educate the public and local students on the impacts of illegal introductions. The timeframe for documenting the initial expansion and impacts of the illegal introductions has passed. The bluegill are fully established and impacting the trout fishery. At this point, it is too late to document the initial impacts of the illegal introductions and not desirable to delay management actions at the Carter Ponds. FWP does plan to involve local students and the public with the recovery of the fishery. Such involvement would help provide more information and understanding on the environmental and social consequences of illegal introductions and may help prevent future illegal introductions.

#### Decision

Based on the Environmental Assessment, public comment, and FWP evaluation, it is my decision to proceed with Alternative D, the proposed action to drain Upper and Lower Carter Pond in an effort to remove the unauthorized species and restock with rainbow trout as described in the draft EA. Additionally, it is my decision to post signs at the sites in order to inform the public of the drawdown and that hazardous conditions may be created while the reservoirs are draining.

I find there to be no significant impacts on the human and physical environments associated with this project. Therefore, I conclude that the Environmental Assessment is the appropriate level of analysis, and that an Environmental Impact Statement is not required.

  
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Gary Bertellotti  
FWP Region Four Supervisor